DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 596 EA 021 375

AUTHOR Nardine, Frank E.; And Others
TITLE How Involved Are State Education Agencies in Parent Involvement? IRE Report No. 17.
INSTITUTION Institute for Responsive Education, Boston, Mass.
PUB DATE Jul 89
NOTE 30p.
AVAILABLE FROM Publications, Institute for Responsive Education, 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215 ($3.00).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Boards of Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Involvement; *Financial Support; *Instructional Leadership; Parent Influence; *Parent Participation; Parent Role; *Parent School Relationship; *State Departments of Education; *Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS *Epstein (Jean)

ABSTRACT

A study attempted to determine the validity of Jean Epstein's contention that "words about the importance of parent involvement are meaningless without financial and technical support." A survey questionnaire was mailed to 197 individuals (including all 50 state superintendents of education) and 38 individuals suggested by respondents. In all, 116 questionnaires representing all 50 states were included for analysis. Overall, findings indicated that parent involvement programs at the state level are at best minimal. State educational agency support for parent involvement is measured in terms of staff allocation, expenditures, and concrete programs and activities. The level of staffing in all states is very small. States that might claim to provide leadership in parent involvement programs are providing insufficient monetary and human resources to ensure healthy and continued collaboration on the district and local level between the school and the home. It is apparent that state-level administrators seem to be delimiting the parent involvement role. Two data tables, three state parent involvement staff allocation maps, and a listing of the frequency of parent involvement technical assistance are appended. (13 references) (SI)

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IRE REPORT No. 17

July 1989

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This manuscript was co-authored by Chapman and Moles in their private capacities. No official support or endorsement by the Illinois State Board of Education or the U.S. Department of Education is intended or should be inferred. This research was supported by the Office of Research of the School of Education and the Department of Educational Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

For a decade and more there has been continued and growing interest in parent involvement in student learning. While nationwide polls of both educators and the public at large support the concept of more home-school interaction (Moles, 1982; 1987), the extent that parent involvement practices have been implemented is not easily discerned. In an article entitled: "Parent Involvement: State Education Agencies Should Lead the Way" Epstein (1987) warns that: "Words about the importance of parent involvement are meaningless without financial and technical support." She continues: "State education agencies have offered mainly symbolic, verbal support for the importance of parent involvement, but little financial support for staff and programs needed to improve parent understanding, teacher practices and family and school connections."

The existence of state level policies, programs and staff allocation concerning parent involvement, therefore, is essential because without them the vital connections between the family and the school are obscured or ignored. State superintendents of education whose jurisdiction includes a myriad of education agencies exercise perhaps the most influence on school district and school level activity in this regard. Through legislation, policies, guidelines staffing and state and federal funding, high level state administrators can, on large measure, determine the success of an educational practice.

While parent involvement activities have taken hold in various

The authors gratefully acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Robert D. Morris, Timothy C. Cowan, Peter T. Mich, Lawrence Lenz and Jeff Molter in the preparation of this manuscript.

states and school districts, it has been difficult to gain a clear perspective of what is happening nationwide. With the possible exception of the special education program area, only a few studies have been undertaken (and then only on a limited basis) to ascertain what state level parent involvement activities are occurring or being planned. For example, Weiss (unpublished paper) described four state initiatives in her research entitled: "The Choices of the States: Family Support and Education Programs." Stallworth and Williams (1983) surveyed policymakers in six southern states in order to obtain their perspectives about parent involvement. School governance and policy making individuals were questioned to determine their attitudes toward parent involvement, and to ascertain current practices and policy recommendations in this regard. Chavkin and Williams (1985) as part of the same set of six-state regional surveys again questioned 30 state educational agency officials about their attitudes and current practices regarding parent involvement activities. Somewhat surprisingly, Williams and Chavkin (1985) in a paper summarizing major conclusions and recommendations based on their six year Parent Involvement in Education Project had a series of conclusions and recommendations for teachers, administrators, and teacher trainers, but failed to draw conclusions about or direct any recommendations whatsoever to state agency officials.

Thus, empirical evidence is lacking to assess Epstein's contention that there is little state level suspport in terms of leadership, personnel, funding, training and necessary state-initiated technical assistance for parent involvement activities. This present study

was undertaken in order to attempt to determine the validity of Epstein's claim.

Procedure and Methodology

The Survey Questionnaire: A seven page parent involvement survey was developed consisting of 16 questions of both the open ended and check list variety. In addition to identifying the state educational agency (SEA) and describing its mission, information was sought concerning staffing, actual or planned parent involvement (hereafter PI) activities, nature and kind of technical assistance available, as well as the target of this assistance (district or school level), if collaboration with other SEA offices occurred, and how often the particular SEA sponsored statewide conferences and visited individual school districts and/or schools. In addition, respondents were asked to suggest other SEAs or other individuals within the state who should be sent the survey in order to ensure accurate description of the state's parent involvement activities.

Additional questions which are not analyzed in the present study were asked. Respondents were requested to report what state level parent involvement legislation existed, and to specify if any regulations and guidelines were in effect. Finally respondents were asked to list two or three school systems within their state which were especially active in parent involvement endeavors.

Survey distribution: The goal of the survey was to identify the nature and extent of parent involvement by state education agencies in all 50 states. At the outset precise information was lacking

concerning which offices within state education agencies were engaged in parent involvement activities. This necessitated developing a comprehensive mailing comprised of all possible state level education agency offices and programs which might incorporate PI practices. In addition, respondents were requested to indicate other agencies and/or individuals who might provide information about state level PI activities to ensure that offices and programs would not be overlooked and that the state activity would not be underreported.

Initially, the survey was mailed to 197 individuals including all 50 state superintendents of education, as well as coordinators or department heads of Bilingual, Migrant, Chapter 1, Community Education, and Compensatory Education programs. An additional 38 questionnaires were sent to individuals suggested by respondents. In all, 235 questionnaires were distributed. At least two individuals and/or agencies in each state received the survey.

Approximately 130 responses were received including 124 questionnaires and 6 letters in lieu of questionnaires. Incomplete questionnaires were not included, as well as those describing special education and missing children programs. In all, 116 questionnaires representing all 50 states were included for analysis. Written and telephone communications with numerous respondents suggest that failure to return questionnaires indicated the absence of significant parent involvement programs and practices within a particular state.

Categorizing educational agencies from the several states was challenging because comparability apparently does not exist. For example, some states have separate Migrant, Bilingual and Chapter 1 programs, while others combine all three programs under one agency. A number of states appear to have programs incorporating parent involvement activities operating directly out of the superintendent's or commissioner's office. Still others have created special external units specifically for parent involvement endeavors. Using both the respondent's office title and the mission description submitted, the 116 questionnaires were assigned to one of ten program categories: Chapter 1, bilingual, migrant, community education, state and federal services/EEO, compensatory education, adult/early childhood, office of the superintendent, special services and other. The 116 questionnaires analyzed in this study are categorized by agency in Table 1.

Each of the respondents was asked to list the number of staff assigned to parent involvement activities and the percent of staff time devoted to these activities. The number of full-time equivalents (FTE) was calculated by multiplying these two figures together. These values were accumulated to provide total staffing by state and by type of state educational association. Table 2 reports the cumulative FTE totals for each of the 10 agency categories.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 1988a; 1988b) were used to standardize these figures. Dividing the number of FTEs by the total number of

elementary and secondary school students for the state yielded the FTE/100,000 students which was used as a basis for comparison between the states. These data were also normalized according to the combined local, state and federal education revenues for each of the states. These values are presented as FTE/$100 million in the state education budget.

Results and Discussion

The unavoidable conclusion to be drawn from this study is that parent involvement programs at the state level are at best minimal.

Figure 1 portrays the number of FTEs allocated to parent involvement in the 50 states. While they range from 0 to 13.5, only 12 states (AR, CA, HI, IN, MA, NC, NH, NJ, NV, OR, TN, and WI) have two or more full-time equivalent staff. Twenty-eight of the states report less than a single, full-time staff member assigned to parent involvement endeavors. When FTEs were adjusted to the number of students enrolled (Figure 2), only nine states (HI, MT, NE, NH, NV, OR, RI, SD and VT) have one or more FTEs per hundred thousand students. Finally, when FTEs were adjusted for the available financial resources allocated to education (Figure 3), only ten states (AK, AR, HI, MT, NH, NV, OR, RI, SD, and VT) have a quarter-time FTE or more.(1) And within this group not a single state had the equivalent of a full-time staff person whose duties were allocated to parent involvement per $100 million budgeted (U.S. Department of Education, 1988b).

From any perspective, these data validate Epstein's contention

(1) Data for Virginia were not reported.

(1987) that state educational agencies offer: ". . . little financial support for staff and programs".

State Education Agency PI Activities

The respondents were asked to indicate whether a given type of technical assistance was: (1) currently implemented, (2) planned for the upcoming year, but not yet implemented, or (3) neither planned nor implemented. Together these data present a composite picture of current and future PI practices. Table 3 describes current and planned PI activities for the SEAs.

The most frequent SEA activity currently being implemented was conducting seminars, workshops or courses for school or school district personnel (68%), closely followed by collecting and disseminating materials and information from various sources on PI (66%). Slightly more than half of the respondents reported the following PI activities: 1) helping PI projects develop advisory councils that include parents (53%) and 2) conducting seminars, workshops or courses for parents (53%). Fifty-three percent of the SEAs reported developing materials for use by school or school district personnel.

Table 3 also shows PI activities that SEAs intend to accomplish in the year ahead, but have not yet implemented. Helping school districts or schools develop evaluations of their PI activities led the list (26%), closely followed by plans to conduct state evaluations of local PI activities (25%) and developing programs and/or materials for in-service PI training (25%).

Additionally, Table 3 reports which PI activities were not in operation and would not receive attention in the ensuing 12 months. Fifty perent or more of the respondents reported that following activities would receive little if any attention:

> Giving demonstration grants to develop PI activities locally (66%)
>
> Conducting recognition programs for outstanding local PI activities (58%)
>
> Developing standards for in-service training of teachers and/or administrators regarding aspects of PI (56%)

Finally, in terms of disbursing funds for the development and operation of PI activities in school districts, it can be seen that 42% of the respondents are currently providing financial support to school districts, 14% plan to provide financial support to school districts' PI endeavors. The remainder or 44% of the SEAs collectively have no plans for disbursing funds in this area in the year ahead.

Technical Assistance

SEA respondents were asked to indicate how frequently various kinds of technical assistance were provided to school districts or schools.

Table 4 reports whether the 15 different kinds of TA were offered on (1) a monthly basis or more often, (2) several times a year, or (3) rarely or never. The most frequent assistance reported by 19% of the respondents was (1) helping parents assist their children with school assignments at home, and (2) assisting school personnel to

communicate information to parents in terms that they understand. Helping parents to get training to strengther home learning activities was third as indicated by 17% of the respondents. And 15% indicated that technical assistance to help parents to become better informed about their child's progress was offered on monthly basis or more often.

Little technical assistance (reported by 9% of respondents) was offered in the following areas:

encouraging parents to attend parent-teacher conferences

encouraging parents to aid in identifying needs or problem areas of the school helping parents participate in school-based management

helping parents to participate in school improvement councils or advisory groups.

Almost no technical assistance (6%) was offered in encouraging parents to participate in parent-teacher organizations.

Table 4 also reports the kinds of technical assistance that were offered on a "several times a year" basis. The four areas that received the most technical assistance according to SEA respondents were:

encouraging parents to attend parent-teacher conferences (59% of respondents)

helping parents become better informed about their child's progress (57% of respondents)assisting school personnel to communicate information to parents in terms that they understand (55% of respondents)

and

helping parents to assist their children with school assignments at home (53% of respondents).

The fewest SEA respondents reported technical assistance was offered in: helping parents to aid in evaluating the school's instructional program (36%); in helping parent volunteers assist in classrooms (36%); and helping parent participate in school-based management (28%).

Finally, Table 4 summarizes the kinds of technical assistance that are rarely or never offered as reported by the SEA respondents. Leading the list is helping parents participate in school-based management (63%). Over half (54%) indicated that helping parents to aid in evaluating the school's instructional program and encouraging parents to assist in establishing educational goals of the school were not high priorities. Technical assistance to help parent volunteers assist in classrooms was not a priority of 52% of the respondents.

A sizable number of SEA respondents rarely offered asssistance in (1) helping parents to assist their children with school assignments at home (29%); (2) helping parents to become better informed about their child's progress (28%); and (3) assisting school personnel to communicate information to parents in terms that they understand (26%).

Conclusions

Based on these data, it is clear that if state educational agency support for PI activities is measured in terms of staff allocation,

expenditures, concrete programs and activities, then substance is given to Epstein's criticism that SEAS offer only lip service to advancing improved home-school connections. While a majority of respondents report conducting seminars and workshops for parents or school personnel around the state, and developing materials, and information, other data show that no forms of technical assistance are provided as often as monthly by even 20% of the respondents.

Furthermore, the level of staffing in all states is very small. Based on data not shown, a majority of respondents were directly funded by federal and state compensatory programs. This suggests that most PI activities documented in this survey are connected to governmental mandates. It is important to note that these compensatory programs are directed at less than half of a state's pupil population. Therefore, most pupils probably do not directly benefit from state level parent involvement efforts.

Based on these data even those states that might claim to provide leadership in parent involvement practices are providing insufficient monetary and human resources to ensure healthy and continued collaboration on the district and local level between the school and the home.

Given the paucity of PI staff allocation at the state level, the majority of queried activities and the variety of technical assistance available are severely limited. And this limitation directly affects what happens at the district and local level.

Almost by definition the few PI staff act as a clearinghouse collecting and distributing information and planning conferences. With these kinds of activities may be necessary and useful, they are not sufficient to establish and maintain meaningful partnerships between parents and educators.

Based on these data it appears that state offices act as if the child's education is still the sole prerogative of the school. This position contradicts nearly two decades of solid research findings that overwhelmingly support the critical contribution of family and home environment to student achievement and school success (e.g. Henderson, 1987; Tangri and Moles, 1987). In fact, Chalker et al. (1984) maintain that "both early and ongoing experiences are important, and in some studies family factors even surpass school factors in predicting student achievement." In addition, it seems clear that, contrary to contemporary emphases, only a few of the respondents were working on a regular basis (monthly or more often) to involve parents in either school-based management (9%), school program evaluation (10%) or helping parents to get training to strengthen home learning activities (17%). It is apparent that state level administrators for whatever reason seem to be delimiting the parent involvement role. In actual practice they may not have advanced much beyond the bake sale parent involvement concept criticized by Henderson et al. (1985).

We as a nation spend more than $158 billion annually on education (U.S. Department of Education, 1988b). Consequently, it seems hard to justify the pittance allotted to parent involvement personnel, programs and practices. If we truly believe that parents make an unique, invaluable and sustained contribution to their children's education, then our state educational leaders need to make parent involvement a much higher priority.

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Table 1.

STATE EDUCATIONAL AGENCIES REPRESENTED

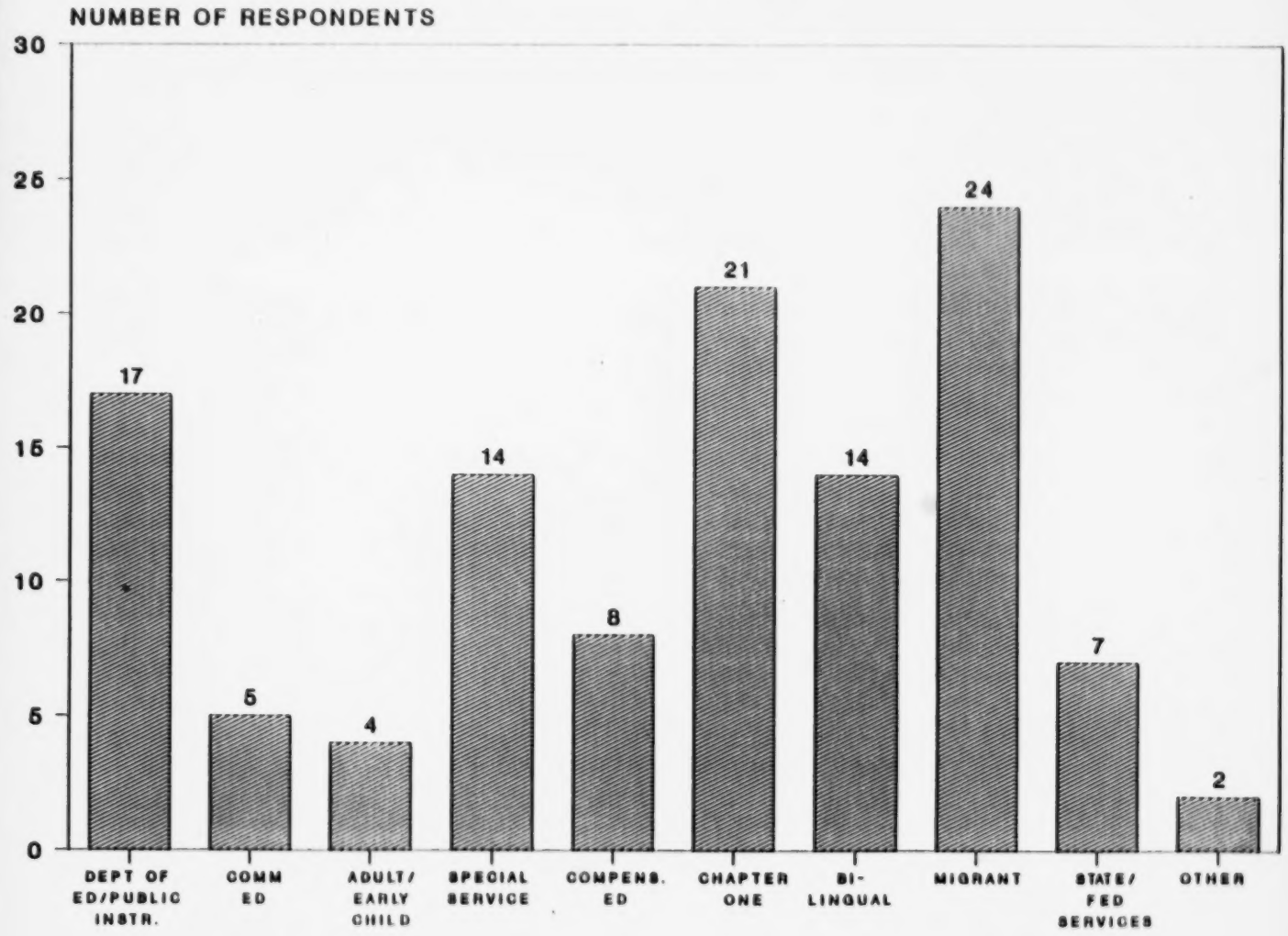


TABLE 2.

FTE'S PER STATE EDUCATIONAL AGENCY

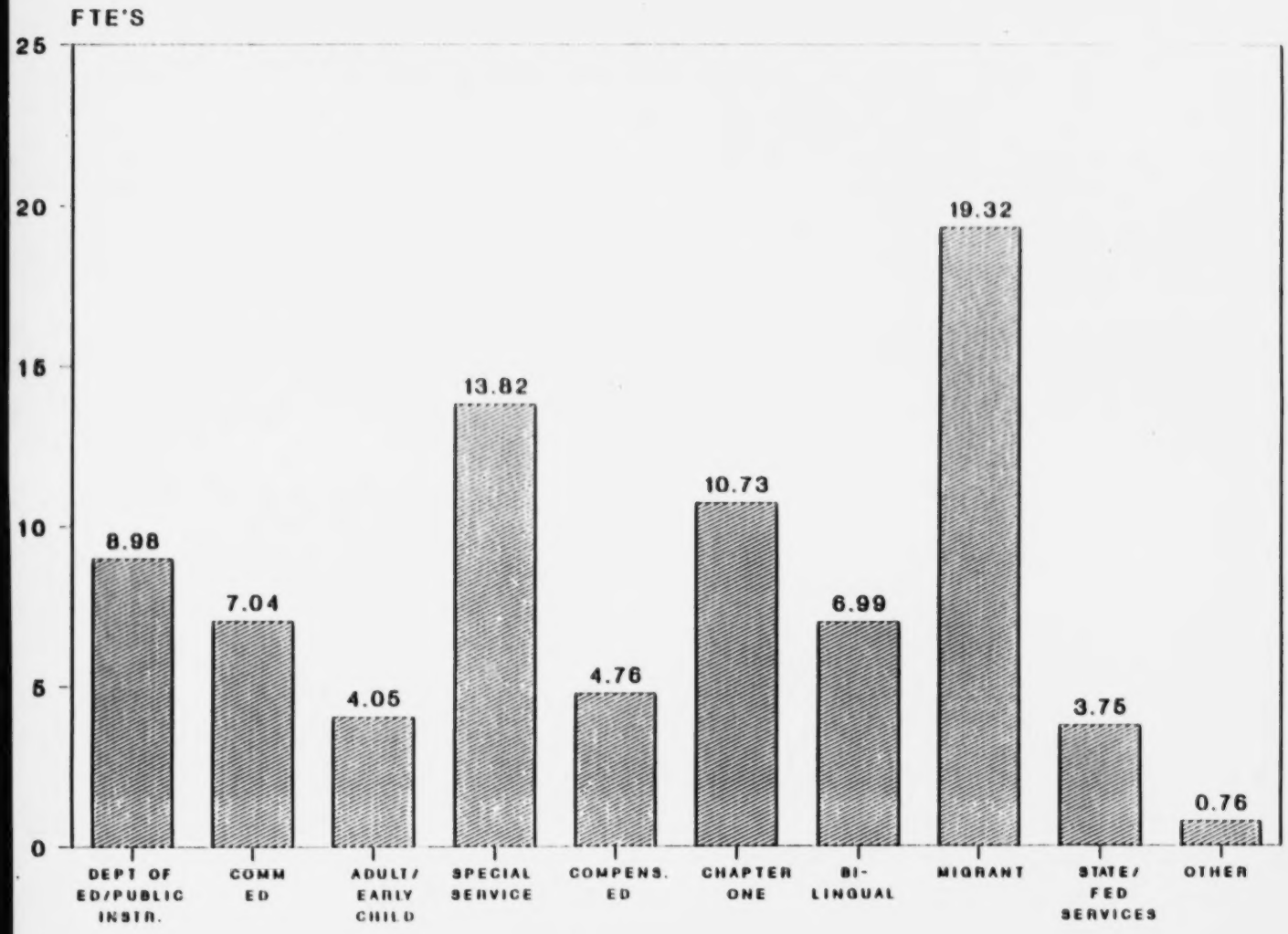


Figure 1.

STATE PARENT INVOLVEMENT STAFF ALLOCATION

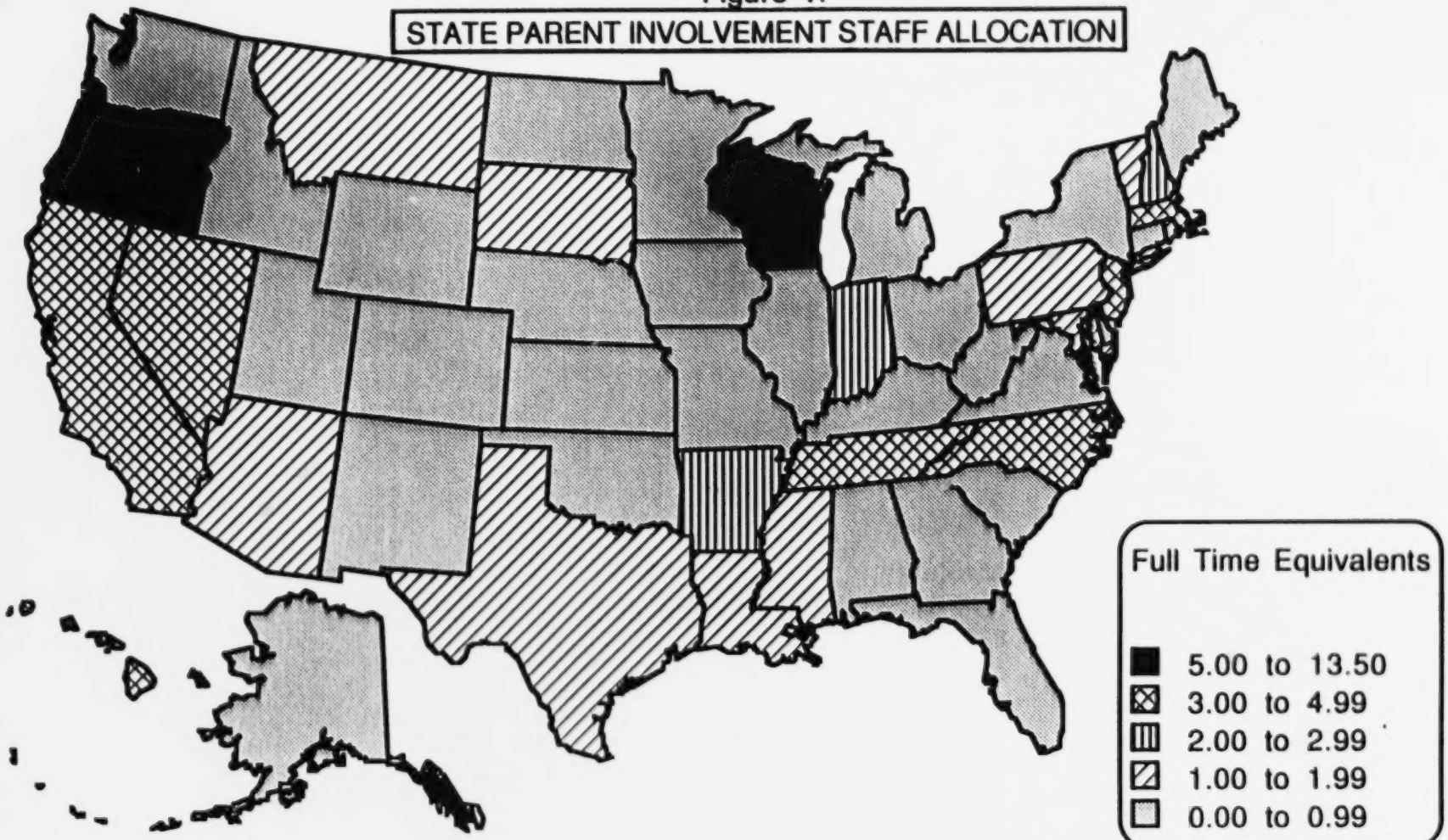
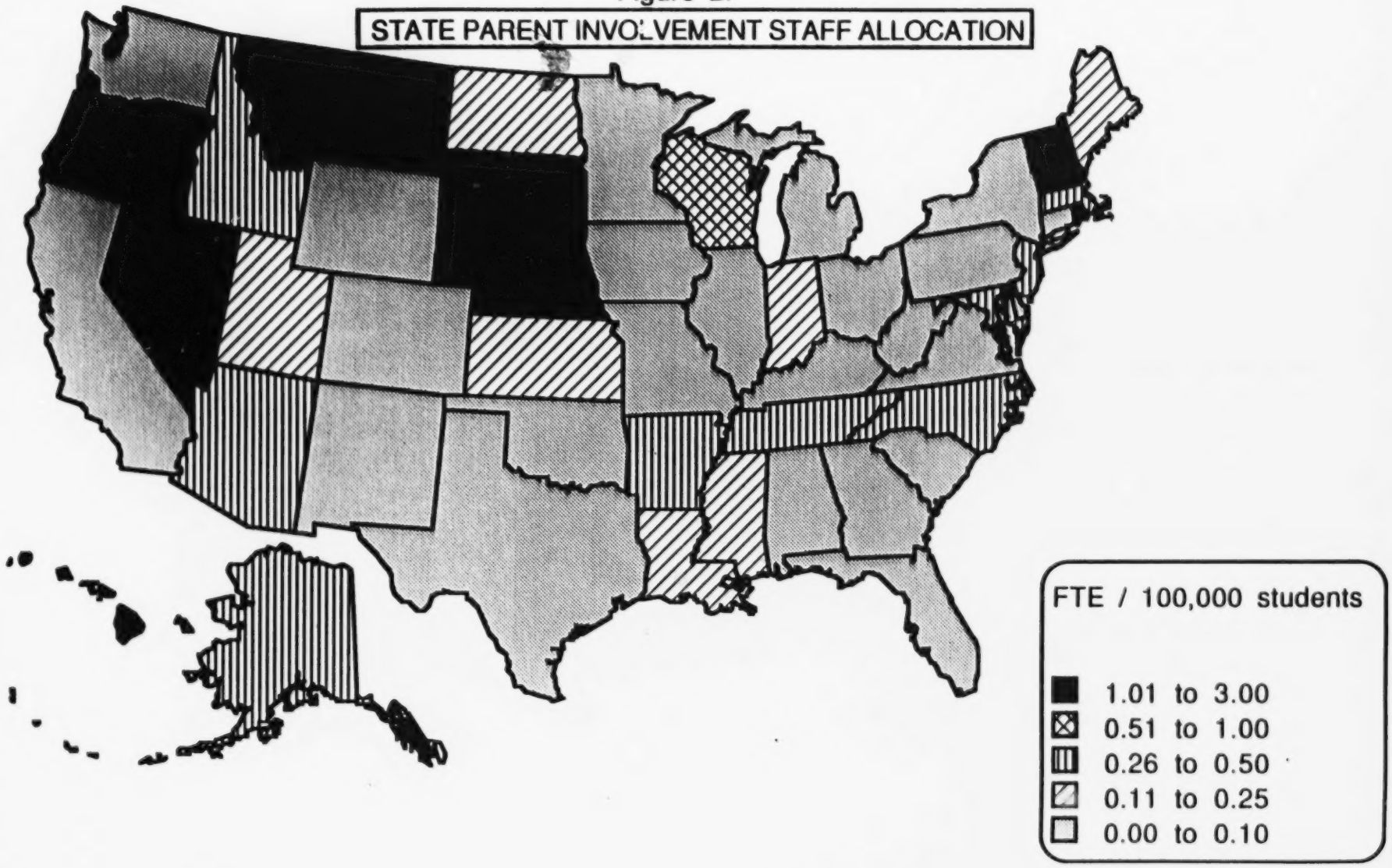


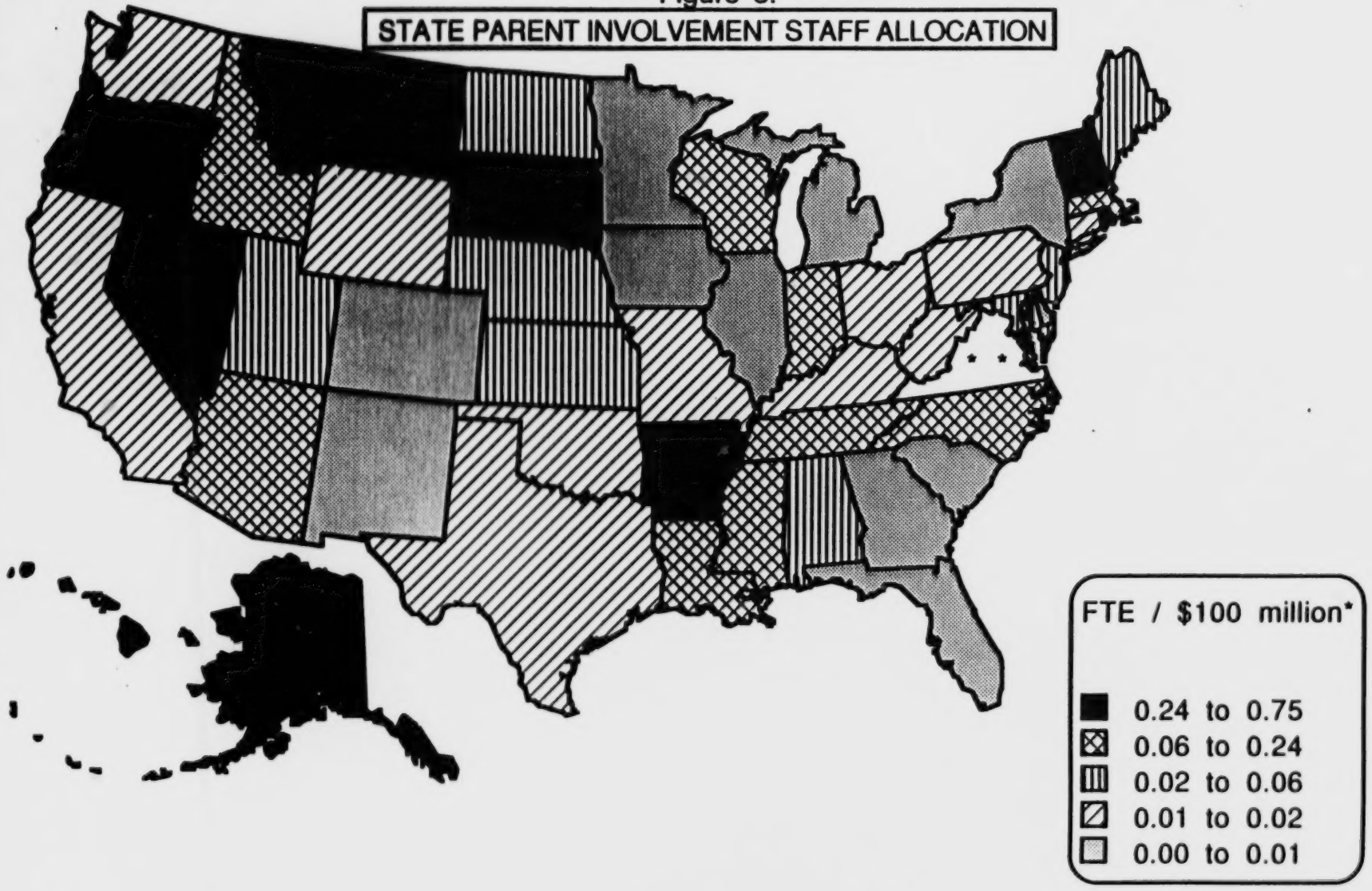
Figure 2.



* K - 12 public school students. (National Center for Education Statistics, November, 1988.)

Figure 3.

STATE PARENT INVOLVEMENT STAFF ALLOCATION



* Total State Education Revenues for K - 12. (National Center for Education Statistics, November, 1988.)

** Budget for Virginia not reported.

TABLE 3.

ACTUAL OR PLANNED PI ACTIVITIES

(% of respondents)	ACTUAL	PLANNED	NEITHER
1) Conducting seminars, workshops or courses for school or school district personnel	68%	25%	18%
2) Collecting and disseminating materials and information from various sources on PI	66%	16%	18%
3) Helping PI projects develop advisory councils that include parents	53%	12%	34%
4) Conducting seminars, workshops or courses for parents	53%	18%	28%
5) Developing materials for use by school or school district personnel	50%	22%	28%
6) Helping school districts coordinate with other community groups or organizations to develop stronger PI activities	45%	18%	37%
7) Disbursing funds for the development and operation of PI activities in school districts	42%	14%	44%
8) Developing materials for use by parents	41%	17%	41%
9) Developing programs and/or materials for in-service training on PI	37%	25%	38%
10) Helping school districts or schools develop evaluations of their PI activities	35%	26%	39%
11) Conducting state evaluations of local PI activities	25%	25%	50%
12) Developing standards for in-service training of teachers and/or administrators regarding aspects of PI	23%	21%	56%
13) Other forms of assistance	22%	-	-
14) Conducting recognition programs for outstanding local PI activities	22%	21%	58%
15) Giving demonstration grants to develop PI activities locally	18%	16%	66%

N=116

TABLE 4.

FREQUENCY OF PI TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (% of respondents)	MONTHLY OR MORE OFTEN	SEVERAL TIMES A YEAR	RARELY OR NEVER
1) Helping parents to assist their children with school assignments at home	19%	53%	29%
2) Assisting school personnel to communicate information to parents in terms that they understand	19%	55%	26%
3) Helping parents to get training to strengthen home learning activities	17%	47%	36%
4) Helping parents become better informed about their child's progress	15%	57%	28%
5) Encouraging active parents to get other parents to participate in school affairs or activities	14%	46%	41%
6) Helping parent volunteers assist in classrooms	13%	36%	52%
7) Encouraging parents to serve as volunteers in other parts of the school	13%	39%	48%
8) Encouraging parents to attend school activities: open house, special events, and the like	13%	51%	37%
9) Helping parents to aid in evaluating the school's instructional program	10%	36%	54%
10) Encouraging parents to assist in establishing educational goals of the school	10%	37%	54%
11) Helping parents and teachers make better use of conferences	10%	47%	43%
12) Encouraging parents to attend parent-teacher conferences	9%	59%	32%
13) Encouraging parents to aid in identifying needs or problem areas of the school	9%	42%	49%
14) Helping parents participate in school-based management	9%	28%	63%
15) Helping parents to participate in school improvement councils or advisory groups	9%	51%	40%
16) Encouraging parents to participate in parent-teacher organizations	6%	51%	43%

N=116

Institute for Responsive Education

The Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) is a non-profit public interest organization which promotes parent and citizen involvement in education with a special emphasis on equity issues.

Through research, policy development, technical assistance and advocacy projects, IRE works to encourage citizen participation as an essential ingredient in school improvement. Believing that access to information is indispensable for effective participation, IRE has produced more than 75 reports, handbooks, and other publications since it was founded in 1973.

Examples of IRE's work include:

* a cross-national study of relationships between parents and schools in low-income communities in the U.S., England, and Portugal to develop new approaches to reach parents who have little or no contact with schools;

* Equity and Choice, a magazine devoted to topics of educational equity, parent choice, and utilization of community resources distributed to teachers, school administrators, and parents;

* staff support and strategic direction for the Massachusetts Organization of Citizens for School Improvement, an effort to establish a network of parents, educators, and civic leaders to promote parent and citizen involvement in school reform in Massachusetts;

* a three-year study of parent and citizen organizations in large cities conducted for the National Institute of Education;

* U.S. Department of Education-sponsored studies of parent choice in urban schools districts, and community decision-making in districts with declining enrollment and resources;

Although private and independent, IRE maintains offices at the School of Education at Boston University, where IRE founder and president Don Davies is a professor. Mr. Davies holds a Doctorate of Education from Teachers College at Columbia University, and is a former Deputy U.S. Commissioner of Education.